

## Guidelines for journaling ...

1. Find a way to keep your journal private – you won't feel free to write with uncensored honesty unless you are sure that it is for your eyes alone.
2. Be honest. Be honest. Be honest. God meets us most powerfully in the raw reality of our lives. Use your journal to ask yourself what you really think and feel, and write without judging what flows from your pen.
3. Be yourself. If writing is not your thing, you could draw pictures or mind-maps. You could cut out things from magazines or newspapers and paste them in. You could write poems, or letters to God, or ... there is no one right way to keep a journal.
4. Write as often as it is meaningful for you to do so. Don't feel bad if it's not every day or even every week – journaling is intended to be a channel of grace, not guilt!
5. What should you journal about? What distinguishes a journal from a diary of events is the emphasis on your own inner world – write about things that have somehow been significant, that have moved you, provoked you, delighted you, upset you ... whether it be when you were reading the Scriptures, having a conversation, watching a movie, reading a book, listening to music, listening to a sermon, walking on the beach or whatever. You may not know why you had that response, but just start with what happened and what you thought or felt. As you write, in prayerful awareness that the Holy Spirit is with you, the hope is that deeper insight will come – maybe not until you re-read your journal much later – an aha! moment, or a God-connection.

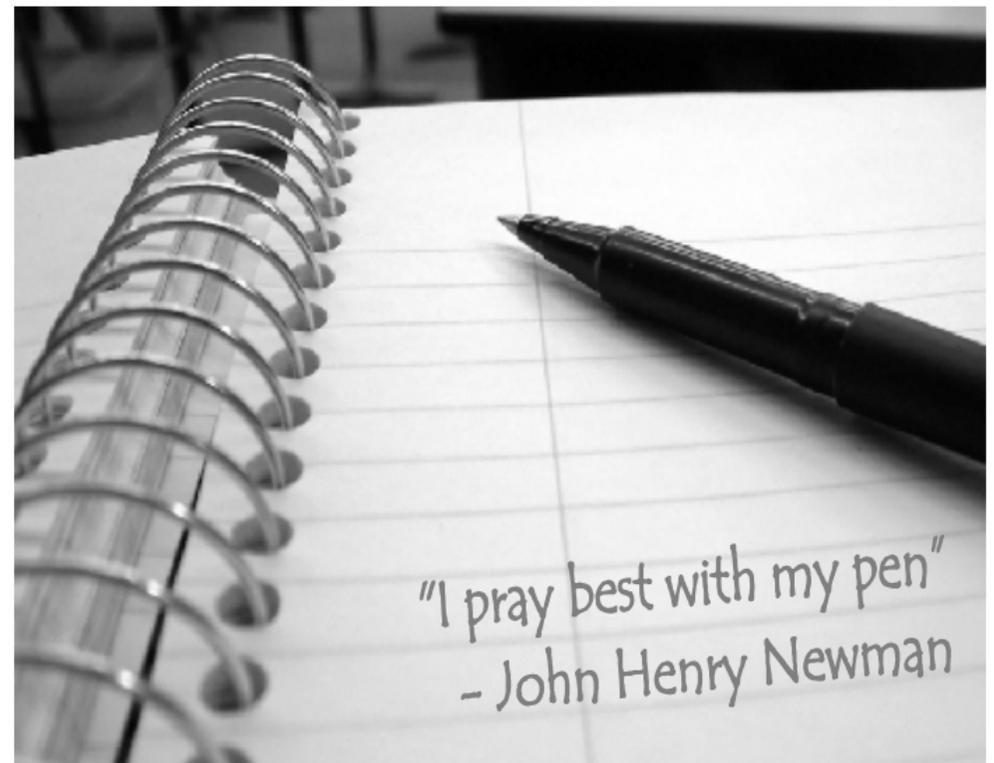
You could also write about dreams, worries, failures, confusions, doubts, answered prayers, experiences of grace ... anything that touches you in some way.

6. From time to time (maybe every 3 months or so, certainly every year) read back over your journal entries, and be aware of themes, patterns, and things that come up persistently. What is God saying in these things? What seems most important to carry forward into the next stage of your journey?

Most importantly of all, get started!

*Feel free to reproduce these guidelines for your own use or to give to others.*

# The spiritual discipline of Journaling



Why journal? There are many reasons that could be given, but the following excerpt perhaps offers the best of these ...

### The Presence of God in Ordinary Life

Let me begin with a story. It is a true story, that of Helen Keller, who became blind and deaf when she was two years old. Helen might have lived her whole life consigned to the severe limitations of a person who could not learn. But she had a teacher, caring and creative, who could not put to rest a dream of deeper possibilities. Realizing that touch was the only channel she had into Helen's inner world, this woman devised a crude set of hand motions and, day after day, putting her hand in Helen's, spelled for her the names of things they were experiencing. For a long time, Helen could not make the association between what she was experiencing and the movement in her hand. She only knew that among the many things intruding on her sense of touch there was also this hand constantly moving in hers. That was all. It had no more meaning to her than the walls she bumped into or the wind she felt. Then one day, as Helen was washing her hands at an outdoor pump, this indefatigable mentor signed "water" again and again with a certain desperateness into her hand, and Helen Finally got it. She understood that the movements in her hand were more than mere motions. They were *signs*, pointing to the objects of her experience. Thus Helen caught the concept of language, and the doors swung open to the whole realm of human knowledge. From that day forward, she never ceased to educate herself, and her horizon just kept expanding.

Very few people are born with Helen Keller's handicaps, but do we really see and hear? I would assert that we are hardly less blind and deaf than she much of the time. We make the same mistake, thinking the ordinary stuff of our experience is all that there is, failing to see and hear the mystery to which it all points. There is someone signing in our hand too, and we don't get it. Like Helen, we think reality is mere object and motion, when in fact it is all language and communication—God, the mystery in the background, speaking to us through all things.

(Thomas Hart, *Hidden Spring*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2002, p. 7)

God in ordinary life? This writer claims that too often we mistakenly think that "the ordinary stuff of our experience is all that there is, failing to see and hear the mystery to which it all points."

How do we make the connection between "ordinary stuff" and "God, the mystery in the background, speaking to us through all things"?

Keeping a spiritual journal can help greatly. It's when we take time to remember, reflect on and pray with our everyday experiences that we find our lives becoming story-shaped. As we write things can become clearer, and our insights deeper. Over time we begin to see connections, patterns and themes. We learn to recognise the footprints of God.

"A journal is, very simply, a record of a journey. It is a means of keeping tangibly in touch with the movement of God in our lives" (Sheila Pritchard)

We have good biblical precedents for the practice of journalling. Prophets like Habbakuk and Jeremiah grappled with the confusion and pain of their call by expressing their complaints and questions very honestly, and as they did they began to discern God's response. In the Psalms we are privileged to read the record of people's praise, thanksgiving, doubts, hurts and laments. Sometimes we can trace the inner journey of the psalmist as they begin with complaint and stumble their way toward a confession of faith and even praise (e.g. Psalm 13).

"If you must rage, a journal is a safe place to do it. If spent anger leaves more space in the heart for prayer, that alone is a good reason for keeping a journal" (Edward Fischer)

There is no right or wrong way to keep a journal. You might use an old exercise book, a loose leaf folder or your laptop computer. The main thing is to be sure it will be private and to be as honest as you can. You are not writing to impress anyone, but to process your raw, everyday experiences, in the hope of understanding them better and recognising the signs of God's presence.

*Continued over ...*